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Message Text

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ACTION ARA-10

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 IO-13 PM-04 NSC-05 SP-02 SS-15 CIAE-00

INR-07 NSAE-00 DODE-00 AID-05 L-03 /065 W
---------- 076283
P 012227Z SEP 76
FM AMEMBASSY MANAGUA
TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 1032

S E C R E T MANAGUA 4141

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: SHUM, NU
SUBJECT: SOMOZA DISCUSSES HUMAN RIGHTS ISSUES WITH CATHOLIC
EPISCOPAL CONFERENCE

REF: MANAGUA 3798

1. ON AUGUST 24 IN PRESIDENT SOMOZA'S OFFICE A MEETING WAS HELD WITH MEMBERS OF THE CATHOLIC EPISCOPAL CONFERENCE. PRESENT AT THE MEETING WERE PRESIDENT SOMOZA, GABRIEL MONTALVO, THE PAPAL NUNCIO, MIGUEL OVANDO Y BRAVO, ARCHBISHOP OF MANAGUA, FILADELFO VEGA, BISHOP OF CHONTALES, CLEMENTE CARRANZA, BISHOP OF ESTELI, AND JULIAN BARNI, BISHOP OF MATAGALPA.

2. THE MEETING WAS CALLED BY PRESIDENT SOMOZA AT THE URGING OF THE PAPAL NUNCIO WHO FELT IT WAS IMPORTANT TO PREVENT A DETERIORATION IN CHURCH-STATE RELATIONS AS A RESULT OF THE CHARGES OF HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS WHICH WERE AGITATING THE BISHOPS AND OTHERS WITHIN THE CHURCH. SOMOZA WAS AWARE THAT THE BISHOPS HAD PREPARED, BUT NOT YET RELEASED, A STATEMENT CRITICAL OF THE GON'S HANDLING OF QUESTIONS OF "HUMAN RIGHTS AND SOCIAL JUSTICE", AS THE NUNCIO PHRASED IT.

3. OVER LUNCH ON AUGUST 26, SOMOZA TOLD THE AMBASSADOR THAT HE HAD GIVEN A THOROUGH BRIEFING TO THE BISHOPES, THE ARCHBISHOP OF MANAGUA, AND THE PAPAL NUNCIO CONCERNING THE INTERNAL SECURITY PROBLEM FACING THE GOVERNMENT IN THE NORTH. HE EXPLAINED TO THEM THE BRUTAL NATURE OF THE FSLN, REFLECTED IN THE COLD-BLOODED KIL-
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LING OF CIVILIAN SHERIFFS (JUEZES DE MESTA). SOMOZA ASSERTED THAT

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HIS READING OF A LIST OF 67 NAMES OF CIVILIANS AND NATIONAL GUARD (GN) PERSONNEL KILLED IN RECENT YEARS BY THE FSLN MADE A DEEP IMPRESSION ON THE BISHOPS. HE STATED THAT HE WELCOMED THE MEETING SINCE IT GAVE HIM AN OPPORTUNITY TO PRESENT A BALANCED VIEW OF THE CHALLENGE TO INTERNAL PEACE AND SECURITY FACING THE NICARAGUAN AUTHORITIES, AND ESPECIALLY THE GN. HE CONFIDED TO THE AMBASSADOR THAT HE DID NOT BELIEVE THE BISHOPS WOULD MAKE PUBLIC THEIR CRITICISM OF THE GOVERNMENT.

4. FOLLOWING UP ON HIS CONVERSATION WITH SOMOZA, THE AMBASSADOR MET WITH THE ARCHBISHOP OF MANAGUA (ACCOMPANIED BY THE DCM AND POL-OFF) ON AUGUST 30, AND ALONE WITH THE PAPAL NUNCIO AT THE NUNCIATURA TODAY (AUGUST 31). THE DISCUSSION FOCUSED ON THE REACTIONS OF THE BISHOPS, THE ARCHBISHOP, AND THE NUNCIO TO THEIR AUGUST 24 MEETING WITH THE PRESIDENT. THE ARCHBISHOP STATED THAT THE BISHOPS EXPRESSED THEIR DEEP CONCERN ABOUT THE FATE OF THE CAMPESINOS IN THE NORTH WHO WERE TRAGICALLY CAUGHT BETWEEN THE CROSS FIRE OF THE FSLN AND THE GN AND OFTEN FORCED TO FLEE THEIR HOMES

AND ABNDON THEIR LANDS. SOMOZA WAS TOLD THAT THE MISTREATMENT AND DISAPPEARANCE OF CAMPESINOS, ALLEGEDLY AT THE HANDS OF THE GN, CAUSED THEIR FAMILIES GREAT ANGUISH AND SUFFERING, WHICH THE CHURCH COULD NOT IGNORE. THE BISHOP OF MATAGALPA, ACCORDING TO THE ARCHBISHOP, FRANKLY TOLD SOMOZA THAT THE CAMPESINOS FEARED TH GN ORE THAN THE FSLN.

5. IN HIS MEETING WITH THE PAPAL NUNCIO, THE AMBASSADOR WAS INFORMED THAT THE BISHOPS HAD PRESSED SOMOZA TO BRING THE GN UNDER STRICTER CONTROL, TO REMOVE THOSE MEMBERS OF THE GUARD RESPONSIBLE FOR ALLEGED ABUSES OF PRISONERS AND CAMPESINOS, AND TO PERMIT ACCESS TO THOSE INCARCERATED SO THAT THEIR SAFETY COULD BE VERIFIED. THE NUNCIO CONFIRMED THAT THE BISHOPS WERE IMPRESSED BY SOMOZA'S RECITAL OF THE FSLN KILLINGS OF CIVILIANS AND MILITARY PERSONNEL, AND THE EXTENSIVE SUPPORT NETWORK BUILT UP BY THE FSLN. THE BISHOPS ARGUED THAT SOMOZA SHOULD ALLOW THESE FACTS TO BE PUBLISHED SO THAT NICARAGUANS WERE AWARE OF THE TRUE SITUATION IN THE NORTH, AND THE GOVERNMENT'S NEED TO TAKE SPECIAL SECURITY MEASURES. THEY ADMITTED THAT SUCH A STEP WOULD RUN THE RISK OF INFLATING THE FSLN IMAGE, BUT IT WAS MORE LIKELY TO DEMONSTRATE FSLN BRUTALITY AND VIOLENCE. ACCORDING TO THE NUNCIO, THE BISHOP OF

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MATAGALPA MENTIONED TO SOMOZA THAT SINCE THE CHANGE OF THE RIO BLANCO GN COMMAND, THERE HAD BEEN A NOTICEABLE DECLINE IN THE NUMBER OF COMPLAINTS REACHING HIM.

6. PARTICIPANTS IN THE AUGUST 24 MEETING SEEMED TO BE PLEASED WITH THE RESULTS. BOTH SIDES WERE ABLE TO OPENLY EXPRESS THEIR PREOCCUPATIONS AND EXCHANGE VIEWS IN A CORDIAL AND RELAXED ATMOSSPHERE. IN FACT, THE NUNCIO EXPRESSED HIS SURPRISE AT THE ABSENCE

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OF ANY SENSE OF TENSE, ADVERSARY PROCEEDINGS. SOMOZA CAME AWAY WITH THE IMPRESSION THAT HIS SECURITY BRIEFING HAD HEADED OFF THE PUBLIC RELEASE OF THE CATHOLIC EPISCOPAL CONFERENCE STATEMENT CRITICAL OF HIS GOVERNMENT. THE NUNCIO WAS SOMEWHAT LESS SANGUINE THAT THE BISHOPS WOULD NOT ISSUE THE STATEMENT IN THE FUTURE. THE BISHOPS, ON THEIR SIDE, WERE PLEASED AT THE OPPORTUNITY TO EXPRESS THEIR CONCERN ABOUT THE GN'S MISTREATMENT OF DEFENSELESS CAMPESINOS IN THE NORTH AND THEIR DESIRE TO SEE SOMOZA BRING THESE ABUSES TO AN END AS SOON AS POSSIBLE. THEY ALSO APPRECIATED THE SOMOZA BRIEFING FOR THE BETTER PERSPECTIVE IT GAVE THEM CONCERNING THE DIMENSION OF THE GON'S SECURITY PROBLEM IN THE NORTHERN AREAS.

7. COMMENT: THE AUGUST 24 MEETING INDICATES THAT THE CATHOLIC BISHOPS AND SOMOZA ARE SEEKING A MODUS VIVENDI RATHER THAN CONFRONTATION. BOTH SIDES WISH TO AVOID A DETERIORATION IN CHURCH-STATE RELATIONS, IF AT ALL POSSIBLE. THE EXISTENCE OF THE BISHOP'S STATEMENT MAY SERVE AS POLITICAL IF NOT MORAL SUASION FOR SOMOZA. IT HAS NOT ESCAPED HIS ATTENTION THAT THE STATEMENT MIGHT STILL SEE THE LIGHT OF DAY IF CHARGES OF CAMPESINO ABUSES CONTINUED, OR INCREASE. THE PRAGMATIC, MODERATE POSITION OF THE BISHOPS PROBABLY CANNOT BE SUSTAINED IF THERE IS AN UPSURGE IN ALLEGED VIOLATIONS SINCE LOCAL PRESSURES INEXORABLY BUILD UP FOR THIE BISHOPS TO TAKE A STRONG PUBLIC STAND ON THE ISSUE. THE CHANGE IN THE RIO BLANCO COMMANDER, THE BISHOP OF MATAGALPA'S DETECTION OF A FALL OFF IN COMPLAINTS AGAINST THE GN, AND SOMOZA'S MEETING WITH THE BISHOPS MAY BE STRAWS IN THE WIND. WHILE IT IS STILL TOO EARLY TO TELL, THEY ARE VIEWED, NEVERTHELESS, AS POSITIVE SIGNS BY THE NUNCIO, AND SOME BISHOPS.
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Message Attributes

Automatic Decaptioning: X
Capture Date: 01 JAN 1994
Channel Indicators: n/a
Current Classification: UNCLASSIFIED
Concepts: HUMAN RIGHTS, MEETINGS, CHURCH STATE RELATIONS, PRISONERS WELFARE
Control Number: n/a
Copy: SINGLE
Draft Date: 01 SEP 1976
Decaption Date: 01 JAN 1960
Decaption Note:
Disposition Action: RELEASED
Disposition Approved on Date:
Disposition Authority: cahillha
Disposition Case Number: n/a
Disposition Comment: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Date: 28 MAY 2004
Disposition Event:
Disposition History: n/a
Disposition Reason:
Disposition Remarks:
Document Number: 1976MANAGU04141
Document Source: CORE
Document Unique ID: 00
Drafter: n/a
Enclosure: n/a
Executive Order: GS
Errors: N/A
Film Number: D760332-0620
From: MANAGUA
Handling Restrictions: n/a
Image Path:
ISecure: 1
Legacy Key: link1976/newtext/t197609102/aaaadjow.tel
Line Count: 144
Locator: TEXT ON-LINE, ON MICROFILM
Office: ACTION ARA
Original Classification: SECRET
Original Handling Restrictions: n/a
Original Previous Classification: n/a
Original Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Page Count: 3
Previous Channel Indicators: n/a
Previous Classification: SECRET
Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Reference: 76 MANAGUA 3798
Review Action: RELEASED, APPROVED
Review Authority: cahillha
Review Comment: n/a
Review Content Flags:
Review Date: 26 APR 2004
Review Event:
Review Exemptions: n/a
Review History: RELEASED <26 APR 2004 by GarlanWA>; APPROVED <02 NOV 2004 by cahillha>
Review Markings:

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US Department of State
EO Systematic Review
04 MAY 2006

Review Media Identifier:
Review Referrals: n/a
Review Release Date: n/a
Review Release Event: n/a
Review Transfer Date:
Review Withdrawn Fields: n/a
Secure: OPEN
Status: NATIVE
Subject: SOMOZA DISCUSSES HUMAN RIGHTS ISSUES WITH CATHOLIC EPISCOPAL CONFERENCE
TAGS: SHUM, NU, (SOMAZA DEBAYLE, ANASTASIO), (MONTALVO, GABRIEL), (OVANDO Y BRAVO, MIGUEL), (VEGA, FILADELFO), (CARRANZA, CLEMENTE)
To: STATE
Type: TE
Markings: Margaret P. Grafeld Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 04 MAY 2006